

Religion NOW

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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COSMIC RELIGION

The statesman and orator Edmund Burke said, "Man is constitutionally a religious animal." Note that word "constitutionally". Burke used language with precision. He presumably meant that religion is not an optional extra in human nature like the ability to carry a tune or ride a bicycle. It is bred into our bone. Or as someone else has said, human beings are incurably religious.

It is unfashionable to speak well of religion these days. Yet as a matter of elementary justice, it needs to be pointed out again and again how impoverished human life would be if it were possible to wipe every vestige of religion off the face of the earth. It has encouraged humans to aspire to a satisfying view of existence as a whole, to be haunted by a vision of the divinely beautiful, to revere a moral ideal which towers above custom and convention. And it is not just the elite - the scholars and artists and saints - who have been touched by religion's magic. It has woven a spell over the minds of ordinary people who know little of theological ideas or ecclesiastical subtleties. The strange yet uplifting truths of religion have become the property of the humblest and simplest, just as surely as they sometimes by-pass the worldly-wise and sophisticated, working a transformation in social values - making the ordinary person feel extraordinary and the extraordinary person feel ordinary.

(from, "Start Your Own Religion," by Colin Morris, BBC Enterprises Limited, London, 1992).

SCIENCE and MYTH in the POST-MODERN WORLD

*"Science must begin with myths, and
with the criticism of myths."*

-Sir Karl Popper

It is tragic to ignore the fact that our culture is still mythic to the core, in spite of our pride in reason. The teacher and writer, Professor Joseph Campbell points out that "it is not science that has diminished human beings or divorced us from divinity. On the contrary, the new discoveries of science 'rejoin us to the ancients' by enabling us to recognize in this whole universe a reflection magnified by our own most inward nature; so that we are indeed its ears, its eyes, its thinking, and its speech." Science is an inquiry into the nature of things, of humankind and our place in the universe. It is the accurate observation and classification of inorganic, organic, psychological, and social data for the purpose of understanding, prediction, and control. Science is a body of organized and exact knowledge.

Scientific disciplines and the researches of the laboratories can take into account only what involves measurement. By controlled observation and repeatable experiment, the scientist can give an accurate account of a restricted portion of reality. Information is deliberately sacrificed for the sake of precision. Science proceeds by abstracting and no harm is done as long as the process of abstraction is recognized and remembered.

Philosophy too has its measurable limitation. It attempts to put its findings in communicable form and therefore in propositional representation.

However, in human experience there is much that will not fall into such patterns. So again for the sake of precision measured aspects must be sacrificed. We know only what we can experience, and what experience lays down

as limits and possibilities. The world of experienceable things the philosopher Immanuel Kant calls the world of *phenomena* or *appearances*. The real world, unknowable, is the world of *noumena* or outside of sense experience.

For Kant the "real world", though unknowable is a necessary assumption. We can say only that it is, not what it is, for it is outside of sense experience.

This meaning is like poetic vision. They are means of expression of persons who are used to grappling with detailed problems of a moral, historical, and scientific character. Their validity consists not in any descriptive or explanatory value, for they are not based on experience and observation, but in the imaginative possibilities and insights which they open to us.

Interpreted in this way the scientific method and the philosophical are not opposed to one another but are complementary, as the works of poets are.

Much of the Bible is nearer to the realm of poetry and music and art than to that of logic. Real communication is possible only when the reader occupies the place of the writer and experiences something of what the original writer experienced.

The language of the New Testament has a large part of imaginative rhetoric, alone adequate to catch up the awareness of believers. The only way we can understand it and communicate it is to enter into its original power of mythic consciousness.

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believers. The only way we can understand it and communicate it is to enter into its original power of mythic consciousness.

Until the scientific revolution it was generally acknowledged that we could not live without myths in which we believed, with which we could identify, and through which we could communicate. Myths gave expression to the mystical in life, our awe as we behold the grandeur of ourselves, our world, and our universe.

Myths are dramatic stories in symbolic language to describe past events of beings, things, situations, or events. Mostly they have to do with origins. The first eleven chapters of the biblical book of Genesis is mythological in content.

A myth is not a fantasy, or an illusion of primitive mentality, but a unique way of communicating what is created and perceived by the imagination. Myths are believed in faith and, though they cannot be proved to be true by reason, they are accepted by reason as pointing to truth; necessary presuppositions.

Myth continues to serve to speak to the philosophy and principles of our universe, the dimension with which science is concerned. Science tells us more about how some of the mystery performs rather than what it is.

Scientific rationalism tends to demythologize the cosmic scene, desacralize the universe, depersonalize truth, and attempt to analyse reality by taking it apart, describing only parts of it. But neither the scientific minded nor the philosophically minded can denigrate myth anymore than they can metaphor. Both are widely and usefully used in our culture.

Our post-modern society feeds upon a host of popular myths and ones

that point to a mystic rather than

rational state of mind. The myth of Babel still has meaning and application today, for example. (Genesis 11).

Most importantly it seems to me, myth is most useful for teaching, giving us illustrations of how to live and face the challenges of our lives.

The knowledge of truth as we understand it is based, not on the theoretical, but on existence, on living reality.

In the Gospel of St. John it is revealed that "God is spirit, and those who worship God can only worship in spirit and in reality".

(St. John 4:24).

Reality is the quality of being true to life; fidelity to nature. It is being genuine. In the Old Testament the prophet Jeremiah in his search for reality received the message: "Go to and fro in the streets of Jerusalem. See, I entreat you, and know! And look in its broad open spaces to see whether you can find one who does justly, who practices faithfulness."

For the prophet it was an illuminating experience. He could not find truth in the collective, nor in the universal, but in the individual and in the specific.

Religion is communicated more by participation and practice than by abstract formulae. In this sense religion as a rational system tends to kill religion as participative action.

One becomes aware of truth by living experience. The eternal meaning in life becomes God in us.

The theologian Paul Tillich stated: "Life is being in actuality and love is the moving power of life." Being, or reality, is not actual without the love which drives everything. In our experiences of love the nature of life becomes

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manifest. It becomes the source of our existence and our ideals.

Spirituality is the highest expression of religion. To be spiritual is to live in view of the ideal, the holy. Love becomes creative justice, a perspective of tolerance and sympathy, without which our lives are narrow and incomplete.

THERE IS NO RIGHT TO DIE

There are those who claim our laws on euthanasia are outdated and unjust. They would allow for mercy killing for extreme cases of dying. Their cry for "the right to die" in our laws is a dangerous point of view.

It is well for us to remember that it was not long ago Nazi Germany hastened the death of unwanted people until it became somewhat commonplace to them and an ignominy on the human race.

Today we have the much discussed and disputed Latimer case in the west where a tired father took the life of his severely handicapped daughter.

The original Greek word for euthanasia meant "to have a good death." Today, amongst us, it has taken on the meaning of allowing a very sick person to be killed.

It has been of general acceptance in our society and health care systems to allow terminally ill persons to die with care being given to them. To conclude that there is nothing more to be done to cure or save a life does not mean a physician has nothing further to do. There are active procedures to be considered in the form of caring treatment when the cure is no longer possible, and none of them need, or should, involve choosing death or the means of death.

Allowing a very sick person to die and killing the person are not morally equivalent. Even in cases of excruciating and intractable pain and

suffering, there is a moral difference between allowing the incurable person to die with care and killing the person.

To be allowed to die by withholding useless treatment allows the patient to die from causes which is no longer reasonable or beneficial to that patient to fight by medical means. To put to death the patient, even if chosen by the patient, cannot impose a duty on anyone else, and it cannot therefore be called a "right."

Society's obligation with regard to the "right to die" point of view is to ensure the conditions and processes, such as in the law, and in the health care system, and medical ethics, which will facilitate a person's control over their own death, and as much as possible in accordance with their own consciences and wishes. We have a moral duty to treat, as well as to care for, the sick and the dying, and when no such duty to treat exists, then caring to allow the patient to have as good a death as possible.

A myth is, of course, not a fairy story. It is the presentation of facts belonging to one category in the idioms belonging to another. To explode a myth is accordingly not to deny the facts but to re-allocate them.

-Gilbert Ryle

"Religion NOW" is published in limited edition for family and friends by the Rev. Ross E. Readhead, B.A.,B.D., Certificate in Corrections, McMaster University. Address mail to comments@religionnow.ca